

BLIZZARD OF '49, WYOMING PUBLIC TELEVISION ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION

Bill: My name is Bill Althaffer. We're filming at Gillette, Wyoming. I live out northeast of Moorcroft about twelve miles. I grew up about fourteen miles northeast of Moorcroft out on Highway 14. I was seven years old when the storm hit. My birth date's in July of '41, and so was between seven and seven and a half years old when the storm hit.

I only remember the highlight type things. A snowstorm to me is no big deal, except the fact that I got to miss two weeks of school. That was a pretty good deal to a kid. I was visiting a lady here the other day and she missed thirty days of school. She said, "That was pretty neat." She said, "I got to stay home for the whole month of going to school." We thought that was pretty neat.

Tom: Was this in Moorcroft that you missed school?

Bill: I was going to country school. We walked about two miles one way to school, the typical uphill both ways. What happened for me to miss that much school, the in the fall of '48 the Highway Department always put up a snow fence out on the highway across what we called Pine Ridge. They got out there and it was muddy and the rancher would let them go out there in his hay field, so they just put the snow fence right in the right-of-way fence on the north side of the road.

After the storm settled where anybody could do anything, dad made sure his stock was all right and then he got on his saddle horse and rode up to see how Frank had weathered the storm. Frank was all right, but he said, "I want to go see what happened at that snow fence." They rode west a couple hundred yards and there was this drift, it was probably twenty foot deep right in the middle of the highway. It had just hit that snow fence and just went up and dropped. [00:02:00] There was this massive drift, I don't know, a couple of hundred feet long, right there in the middle of the road.

If there had been traffic out to there, that just stopped everything then to that point. The wind ... others have probably talked about this that was older than I, but it just blew for days. We just had storm after storm after storm. They finally got out there with a snowplow about as far as they could go with a V-plow. The Highway man said he backed up and took a hell of a run at it and he said, "It just stopped me." Of course it would.

They had to get in a rotary plow. They had to bring it in from somewhere out of our part of the country to finally get in there. When they got other roads cleared out to where they could there, then they plowed that out. I wish I knew how

they did that because that bank was layered. It was tiered back. I could walk through up on one of those decks up above. I would not walk through that. My older brother, he'd walk through it, but I said I won't walk ... Because you couldn't see. The snow would just be swirling in there, even after we started to school.

I'd either get up on top or up on one of those tiers, so if a car came through it wouldn't run over me and kill me. I can remember for at least two weeks after the initial storm, after I started back to school, so it would be like a month afterwards, there would be times when it was just falling in there so bad you couldn't see through that drift at all.

Tom: Help me. Explain this a little better for me. Are you saying that the rotary plow went through this drift and basically dug a tunnel through it?

Bill: No, it wasn't a tunnel. They had to go through maybe with some kind of a Cat and tier it back because it was so deep that they couldn't cut it with a plow. They had to work it down someway. You'd be up there like three or four feet and then it'd be an eighteen or twenty inch two-foot deck [00:04:00] and then up so it was V'd down in, but it was stair-stepped up. I'd get up on one of them and walk through on that so I wasn't where the cars would hit me.

Tom: So the road was like down here ...

Bill: Yeah. It was this massive V. Well, that snow blowing would just get there and just swirl. They'd have to come through and push it out then of course and get it out of there. It swirled in there so bad, you couldn't see ten feet in front of you, and I refused to walk through that at all. Even as a kid, I said if a car goes through there ... Of course in my mind the people would come through forty miles an hour, which it wouldn't have been, but it still ... And that was there quite a little while. I don't remember how long, but quite a little while before that snow finally melted off in there and that drift was gone. It was pretty interesting.

Tom: A lot of people told me that the last ones in some places were not gone until July.

Bill: I'm sure. I'm sure that there was. Again, that wouldn't hang in my memory. Snow wasn't a big memory to a youngster who enjoyed playing in the snow. I'm not sure just which direction to go from this now. We talked about the Army coming in with crawler tractors. I was thinking about that the other day. I can remember being disappointed. One of the neighbors had come back from World War II and bought a D6 Cat and did dirt work around the country, a big yellow Caterpillar tractor.

I thought that was pretty neat and I was looking forward to a big Caterpillar tractor coming in and it wasn't a yellow tractor. I can remember looking out and it's just a dull old ... It wasn't even pretty green. I can remember the disappointment that I felt when I looked out there and it wasn't ... It was one of those Army Cats came in and plowed us out and then plowed the roads on down so dad could get down to get to some feed.[00:06:00] He had the horse and the sled then, but he got the truck out and then he could come into Gillette here to Wyodak and got a truckload of coal.

We used to get one in the middle of winter, so sometime he came in and got a load of coal for us and he had to park the truck along the highway. He couldn't get back in. Again, that snow just blowed for several weeks afterwards. It just filled everything up. I'm sure he took the car out and parked it out there too, although I wouldn't remember that because actually up until '49 the truck was our transportation. We didn't even have a runnable car.

I told you when we was here before the neighbor lived across the road, an old retired gentleman. When he'd come out to get his mail he'd bring his coal bucket out and get a bucket of coal out of the truck to take back. If it wasn't enough, he'd come out and get whatever coal he needed until the weather cleared up, the roads cleared up to where his son could get out and get him a little coal, but he couldn't get in until the snow went down in the spring because they didn't plow him out. He didn't have livestock to get to. I've had people ask me did he have permission? You didn't give permission then. That was just ... There was no paying for the coal. We was just glad we had coal to help somebody out.

I remember talking to a fellow here a while back ... There was a coal mine west of Sundance about seven or eight miles. It was a private mine. As soon as the storm cleared up to where they could, then they loaded up ... This fellow had his miners load up what equipment they had with coal and the miners scooped the road out into Sundance so they could start getting coal into people that was there. The people didn't get a stockpile or a truckload of coal at a time where they'd have a ton or a half a [00:08:00] ton of coal in their bin, so they were just days away from a disaster.

Don Dickey had talked about how they plowed ... The first thing they did was plowed out here to the Wyodak and that was for the same reason. There would be people that were just ... Widows and stuff didn't have a lot to go on. They bought what they could afford when they could, so they had to get the coal to these people. Those coal miners, they knew how to run shovels into Sundance.

When I talked to you a minute ago, I doubt anybody has brought this up, but you think about how much different it would have been if this storm would of hit before or during World War II. Before the economics was really bad. The

equipment wasn't here to do it. During World War II, all of our young men were gone. You didn't have the Army here available to help out. They were all overseas. If this would of happened a few years sooner, it would have been an entirely different economic disaster for the country. It would of had a great deal of different impact on it.

Tom: You were also talking about how you had just moved into a new house, so it would have been a lot different for you guys too if you had been in the old house. How did you fare in the new house?

Bill: It was insulated, Tom. The old house was a log house. The snow actually blowed through the cracks in the walls I can remember. When it was cold, you just couldn't keep the house warm. That old heater would be red glowing hot and you'd eat your meals standing around the heating stove in that old house. There was an inch board between us and forty below sleeping up in the loft of that old house.

When they built the new house, there was actually insulation available at the time and the folks insulated it two inches. It wasn't a lot, but [00:10:00] it was stuccoed, it was air-tight, and they had put a big Montgomery Ward furnace in the basement and there was a big grate in the floor right in the hallway, so we was comfortable. There was no problem there, but that old bugger ate a lot of coal. It was a big furnace. It was a big house. It was thirty-two by forty-two with an upstairs and a basement and an add-on porch, a closed in porch.

That's what the coal was for. We burned a lot of coal in it. It just happened to be that we was up to needing coal pretty soon when they plowed us out. It was a blessing to have that Cat come in because we lived a half-mile off the highway. That would have been an awful time getting a truck out to try to get in to get coal. The neighbor that lived across the road, his son lived nearly a mile back off the road on over in the open country, so I don't know how long it was before he was able to get out and get any coal for his father there.

I talked to this lady the other day that was ahead of me in high school a year. She was eight years old. She missed a month of school. They lived out this side of Moorcroft and her uncle drove the school bus. Her dad and uncle had to walk through pastures and find a trail around where they could get that school bus out to the highway and get it to town and then the school system had to get a substitute driver because he had to be home looking after his livestock.

Then when she was able to go to school, her dad had to walk her to the highway. They lived far enough back off the road, he just didn't ... See, I had an older brother to walk with. He's five years older than I, but she didn't have anybody to walk with and she's eight years old. He'd have to walk her down and then meet

the bus. The bus quit them ... Strange bus driver and a shy girl, the bus quit them one night and she's the [00:12:00] only child left on the bus.

The guy's trying to get it going and an elderly couple came by and the man is helping him trying to get that bus going. The bus is getting cold, so they put this little girl in this strange car with this strange older woman, and she said, "I was just absolutely petrified." That woman wouldn't hurt her for the world, but she said, "I didn't know that." She remembered how scary that was for her, sitting there in that car waiting for them. Finally they had to take her up and meet her dad because they didn't get the bus going to do that.

Tom: You're phone is going off here.

Bill: I can't imagine anybody calling me, good looking as I am. Can you imagine people trying to call me? To me that was a pretty interesting story. I've told you my sister ... We already discussed that. My sister had to be in town for some event in town and they carried her in because she had to stay in town. We didn't have buses at that time, so my dad got her into Moorcroft, or my oldest brother, whichever. There she was, she was isolated in Moorcroft till they could get the roads cleared out and get something out to get to town to bring her home. I think she said it was three weeks before she got back home, a fourteen year old girl all by herself in town with whoever she was boarding with in there. That's all she could remember.

We had moved the old log house down a couple hundred, three hundred yards from the new house and the old log granary that had been there and was using it for a hog building. That's the only livestock we lost. We had timbers to protect our cows, but the hogs got in there and it got cold and they piled up and smothered two pigs out of probably fifty, seventy-five pigs they had [00:14:00] down there, but that's the only livestock we lost out of the storm.

Tom: None of them froze though?

Bill: No, none of them froze. That wasn't a problem, but they'd just get to piling in there. Pigs will just keep moving out and ... If they get too warm, they'll move out and somebody else go down, but somebody got backed in there tight enough he couldn't get back up and he suffocated in there. As soon as the storm was over, they'd go down and scoop out the feed bin and get them back on feed.

The cows was in ... We got good timber ridge there. A part of what they call Pine Ridge is down there and they'd just get up in the timber. They might of been kind of hungry by the time they got feed to them, but there weren't no frostbite or anything like that.

Tom: Describe for me, Bill, one more time ... You were probably five or six when you were in winters in the old house. Can you describe a bad storm in that old house, how cold it got? You said the snow was sifting in. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Bill: The chinking just wasn't very good in that old house. The first homestead house burned down and this house was built in a hurry, trying to get them a place to live. There was big old cracks in the floor. They had twelve inch, fourteen inch boards for floor boards. Just a few years ago it dawned on me they built that floor out of green lumber and it shrank. You couldn't play marbles in the house because of the cracks in the floor. The marbles would fall through the cracks in the floor.

The big old logs, they was twelve, fourteen inch diameter logs that they built it out of and the chinking in it, actually snow would blow in and drift in on the floor of that house. Mom and dad had built a kitchen on the house after they were married and it was frame building, no insulation. There [00:16:00] was frame and good boards out there and they had the kitchen stove out there, cook stove, but it didn't heat ... Just the one inch board between you and forty or whatever below and the wind blowing, so we had a big potbellied stove, as they called them, in the living room. I can remember it just glowing red hot.

We'd get our meals and stand there in front of that stove and eat and our face would get so hot we couldn't take it. We'd turn around and turn our back to the stove and eat, and our back would get so hot we couldn't take it. You just turned back and forth keeping warm in that bad weather. Of course us kids took a bath in a washtub, and I always laughed about that. When you got bigger, then you took a bath in the wash pan. I said the bigger you got, the smaller the container of water. That didn't make sense to me. I always laughed about that.

We had electricity in '48. I don't remember ... I'm assuming the electricity was probably off, but I don't remember. Again, we had just came from the nice Aladdin lamps, so it wasn't a big deal to be lighting the house up again with Aladdin lamps. But I'm sure it was in '48, the same year we built the house, that we got the electricity. You can check the history records on that and correct me if I'm wrong when you do your research. Again, for a child it had to be something more than extraordinary to remember some of those events.

Tom: As you said, as a child it's snow, it's fun. I get to play. I don't have to go to school. It still seems to me like this storm still sticks in your head.

Bill: Oh, yeah. It was absolutely more than ... You know from history it was the largest storm we've had in recorded history as far as the amount of square miles it covered, but for a child [00:18:00] even this was way more significant than any

other storm that we'd ever had. You'd have a two or three day storm, we still do, but this thing in it's initial event was like three days and then it just stayed on. When they plowed roads to get truckloads of hay into people to feed their cattle, that Cat had to sit there while they unloaded the hay and plow the road out because it would drift in so they couldn't drive back out.

You can sit here on this side of it, Tom, and it's hard to stop and remember how extreme it was. I wish I could go back and talk to dad because his memory would be more complete. I just remember to me it was an amazing thing because we'd put chains on the old truck and haul hay to the cows and you'd dig through the snow. These were big trucks bringing hay in and they would have to bring it in and then sit there and keep the Cats idling, and that snow would be blowing so you couldn't hardly see to unload the bales and stuff like that. It was amazing.

I told you about the rancher up north that called in the County Commissioner and wanted hay for so many head of cows, and the Commissioner said ... I won't name him, but he said, "We'll bring out hay for that many cows, but by God you better have that many cows on the tax roll this fall. He hadn't been paying taxes on as many cows as he had setting out there on that ranch. That of course wasn't totally unreasonable either. That happened.

If it hadn't been for that ... You think of the amount of livestock that would have perished if we hadn't had the Caterpillars, the Army coming in with crawler tractors, because people ... like Albert had that Cat locally, but that was the only Cat, and he was six miles away. He had his hands full with everybody just getting in ... He lived back two and a half miles off the highway or three [00:20:00] and had neighbors up there, so his Cat was busy just dealing with their situation. He didn't have a lot of time to go anywhere else and do anything. All them big ranchers out here west of Gillette, those cattle would just starve to death if they hadn't had the equipment and they'd of lost infinitely more livestock.

Tom: Were they doing air drops out here also, do you recall?

Bill: They may have, but not where I would have known about it. I have tried to get my memory to kick in and remember if there were any planes around and I can't remember planes coming over. I can remember the World War II planes flying over formations out of Rapid City flying over. What a thrill that was to a little kid to watch that. I don't believe there were planes flying over our part of the country.

Other places where it was more open and more desperate, they did. They had people with private planes, they would have ways of marking out there in the country we need a doctor or we need this medicine or need this food or whatever, and they would air drops in. I can remember guys talking about flying

over and dropping bales out, and those bales hit the ground and just exploded. They had to be careful that they didn't hit the cattle with the bales. I'm sure that happened some, but they had to try to be careful so they didn't bomb the cattle with those bales of hay.

I think I told you we lived in Kansas, my wife and I, for seven or eight years a few years back and I can remember them fellows talking about they walked across the snow and greased their windmills. I mean the practical farmer down there, windmills needed greased when this was all over with and it was just easier than climbing the ladder. They'd walk out and go in [00:22:00] the barn and then climb down to feed their livestock to the barn. People talking about you could ... Street lights in some places, you could walk up to the street lights, it was that terribly deep.

It's hard to imagine. I can understand that in Kansas because I went through there in the Army on the bus and you couldn't get into the towns. They'd had a blizzard down there and you couldn't get off the highway down into the little towns, and this is back in the '60s, in '63.

Tom: You do remember the Army dozers was here in Gillette?

Bill: I'm assuming they was here in Gillette, but it's an Army dozer that came up to our place, because I can remember the disappointment at not seeing the big yellow ... I was excited. I was tickled. I'm trying to think of any other ... I think I've covered about everything that ...

Tom: Do you recall people in trouble at all from the storm? I think there was some talk about somebody having an appendicitis attack or something?

Bill: Yeah. One of the people that were interviewed here before had talked about that. They had to get a doctor to them or get them to a doctor, but we ... If that happened, I'm not aware of it around our part of the country. Had it happened, there would have been a turnout of neighbors to do anything they could to take care of it.

Tom: That brings me to the next point about people really pulling together during the storm.

Bill: Like I say with the coal out there, there was no discussion of whether it was right or wrong for him to get coal off that truck. It would have been stupid not to. You expected that, and you wouldn't have expected to pay. You didn't [00:24:00] ... Your neighbor, you traded work. We traded brandings with each other over the years and helped out.

My oldest brother had appendicitis just after the war, and this is before this happened. He was here in the hospital fifty-eight days. It had ruptured on him. One of the neighbors had a new car and he went to check how he was getting along and said to my dad, he said, "Jim, if you need to take that kid to Mayo," he said, "I got a good car. We'll load that kid up and we'll take him to Mayo if that's what he needs."

Tom: People really pulled together?

Bill: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. A little side issue, my brother would have died, but they had just released penicillin for civilian consumption and the doctor got a hold of people back east and they air-flighted in thirteen bottles of penicillin because he was so infected. I mean just weeks before it was not available because they saved all the penicillin for our boys that had been shot up in the war.

Tom: Lucky guy.

Bill: Is that all?

Tom: I don't know.

Bill: Is the pay envelope at the door or ...

Tom: No, you signed it away.

Bill: I can't think of anything else, Tom. I tried to go over my cards here ...

Tom: That's everything that I had from our last interview too, so we can call that a wrap.